Faith in the Book of Romans

(Frank Jamerson)

It is only by faith that we can be saved, but we are not saved by faith only. The word faith, or belief, is mentioned over sixty times in the book of Romans and it is used in at least five different ways in the book. By metonymy, it refers to what is believed, the gospel or teaching of Christ. After affirming, ***"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek"*** (**Romans 1:16**), Paul affirmed ***"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed..."*** (**v 17**). Earlier, he had said he was ***"separated to the gospel of God"*** (**v 1**), and that his mission was that all nations may respond in ***"obedience to the faith"*** (**v 5**). The faith they obeyed obviously refers to the gospel, as it does in the tenth chapter, where he wrote, ***"the word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach)"*** (**v 8**). Paul was sent to preach the faith, or the gospel of Christ.

Sometimes the word faith refers to the act of believing, or mental assent. Paul, speaking of the gospel, said ***"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from*** (Greek: ek - *out of*) ***faith unto*** (Greek: eis - *unto/into*) ***faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith"*** (**Romans 1:17**). In the tenth chapter, he shows clearly that mental assent by itself will not save a person. ***"For whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"*** (**vv 13-14**). First, notice that four things are mentioned as essential to salvation. The word must be preached (referring to the original Spirit-guided messengers of the word), then a person must hear (faith comes by hearing, **v 17**). It must be believed (accepted as true) and then the person must call on the name of the Lord. Calling refers to obeying, not simply believing (**vv 13, 16**). Note that a person cannot hear unless the message has been preached, but it may have been preached, and a person may never hear it. A person must hear before he can believe, but he may hear and not believe. A person must call on the name of the Lord in order to be saved, but he may believe and not call, therefore a person is not saved at the point of mental assent (faith). What some call *"the Roman Road to salvation"* (salvation by faith only) is clearly contradicted by this passage.

Faith may be used in the comprehensive sense to include obedience. Abraham is used as an example of justification by obedient faith, not by perfect works (**4:1-12**). The argument in this section is that Abraham was justified without circumcision, and Gentiles can be justified by walking ***"in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised"*** (**v 12**). This is called ***"obedience of faith"*** (**1:5**). The gospel saves believers (**1:16**), but it is believers who act upon their belief, or call on the Lord (**10:13-14**). The faith that saved Abraham was not simply mental assent, but obedient faith. Paul clearly taught that we are made free from sins after we obey the gospel. ***"But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness"*** (**6:17-18**). Paul concluded the letter by saying that the gospel was given to all nations ***"for the obedience to the faith"*** (**16:26**). One who does not have enough faith to obey Christ, does not have enough faith to be saved by faith!

Faith is also used in referring to personal conviction. Some of the Roman Christians believed they could eat anything, while others believed they should eat only vegetables (**14:1**). Some esteemed one day above another, while others esteemed every day alike (**14:6**). These were matters of individual conscience, not things that were immoral within themselves, nor did they involve collective activity. Paul said, ***"Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is the man who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats; for whatever is not from faith is sin"*** (**14:22-23**). Clinton Hamilton commented: *"The term 'faith' in this chapter does not refer to the body of truth, the gospel, revealed through the Holy Spirit. Verse 2 and v. 23 appear to make this abundantly clear. What is under view in the term is what conviction a person holds on a matter that is not a requirement of the gospel"* (Truth Commentary, p. 782). Each person must live with his own conscience, but his conscience is not everybody's guide!

The word faith sometimes refers to faithfulness. Speaking of the unbelief of the Jews, who had received the law, Paul said, ***"For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness*** (*faith*, KJV) ***of God without effect?"*** (**3:3**). In the first chapter, Paul commended the faithfulness of the Romans. ***"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world"*** (**1:8**). He was certainly not talking about faith only. Their belief had moved them to ***"obey from the heart that form of doctrine to which (they) were delivered"*** (**Romans 6:17**). Their faith caused them to call on (obey) the Lord (**10:13-14**) and they continued to ***"stand by faith"*** (**11:20**) which was the reason their faith was ***"spoken of throughout the whole world."*** That is the Roman road to salvation!